

PRESS RELEASE



The Cleveland Museum of Art

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FAIRFIELD PORTER RETROSPECTIVE OPENS AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART
November 9 - December 31, 1983

Seventy-six oil paintings are presented in the special exhibition, Fairfield Porter (1907-1975): Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction, which will be on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from November 9 through December 31, 1983. The exhibition--the first major retrospective since Porter's death--has provided an opportunity to reassess his place in the history of American painting. Rarely has a posthumous exhibition so quickly prompted critics to claim for an artist the key position that eluded him in his lifetime, establishing his reputation as a major painter and influence on other painters. The exhibition was organized by Kenworth Moffett, curator of twentieth-century art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Porter's first retrospective--at The Cleveland Museum of Art in 1966--was organized by Edward B. Henning, then curator of contemporary art and now chief curator of modern art. At the time, Henning observed that history was likely to judge Fairfield Porter far more important than many more avant-garde artists of his generation. That seems to be the judgment now taking shape, on the basis of this exhibition, as Porter's work is seen to be part of the mainstream of twentieth-century American painting, rather than an attractive alternative to it.

Porter's subjects--a pleasant garden, sailboats under sunny skies, a table not yet cleared of the supper dishes, friends and family at leisure--earned for him the label of "realist" painter because they represent real and familiar scenes.

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But his approach to painting derived from the Impressionists' high-keyed colors and shimmering light, and he used much of the slashing, melting, paint-laden brushstrokes of the Abstract Expressionists. Of this distinctive combination of subject and style, Porter's friend, poet and critic John Ashbery, wrote that his "painting has the vehemence of abstraction, though it speaks another language." It is the language of contentment in the quiet daily experiences of a comfortable life, in a vocabulary of rich and vigorously applied paint.

When the Cleveland Museum purchased Porter's large painting, Nyack, 1966-67, which is in the present exhibition, the artist wrote to Henning: "As a painter I am torn between wanting to be as spontaneous as the Impressionists and wanting something large and deliberate, full of the pressure of the world. It is hard to be attentive enough for the first and knowing enough for the second." How Porter struggled to reconcile spontaneity and deliberation is evident in some of the most interesting paintings of the 1950s and early '60s, such as Schwenk, 1959, on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Like the two painters he most admired, Velazquez and Vuillard, Porter tried to balance his love of the medium--of the physical properties of oil paint--and his love of visual reality, of nature, light, cherished people and places, as they appeared to him. In Vuillard's paintings of domestic interiors and tranquil moments he found "a revelation of the obvious." "What I like in Vuillard," he said, "is that what he's doing seems to be ordinary, but the extraordinary is everywhere."

It was that combination he strove for, concealing artfulness and complexity under a guise of naturalness and simplicity. He avoided any appearance of virtuosity in either subject or style. Porter constructed his intimate, almost homespun images by relating simplified masses of light and shade in broadly

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painted areas to define space. He generally made no other attempt to model forms with conventional transitional halftones. Splashes of color define highlighted areas and create a tapestry-like decorative pattern on the canvas surface.

As he devoted a good part of his painting process to balancing, adjusting, and modulating color, often overpainting to simplify and create nuances of change, his work rapidly increased in daring and mastery. His mature style of the 1960s and '70s--and many of the best works were done in his last ten years--show a freedom and intensity of both emotion and paint. Certain late pictures, like Sun Rising out of the Mist, 1973, from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. John W. Payson, combine natural and invented colors in a completely unliteral way that is yet absolutely convincing in light and mood.

Porter's paintings have been described as conveying a mood of "eternal summer, everlasting vacation, continuing family." They depict a world of domestic felicity which in many respects accurately reflects his life. He was born in a Chicago suburb to a well-to-do family, took a degree in art history at Harvard, studied painting at the Art Students League, traveled extensively in Europe as a young man, inherited enough money that he never had to work, married a poet from an illustrious Boston family, had five children, and divided his time between spacious homes in Southampton and Maine. The sadness of his life, the incurable illness of his first-born son, drained his energies until the mid-1940s. Not until then, when Porter was in his forties, did he begin to invest his energies in his paintings. By then he had come to know many painters and to collect works by Willem de Kooning and by other artists he admired.

Fairfield Porter was also a respected and often controversial art critic, noted for his independent judgment and pungent style. He wrote for many periodicals, particularly for ARTnews in the '50s and The Nation in the '60s, winning the Longview Foundation award for criticism. Of the interplay of his painting and

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criticism he said: "I got ideas all the time for what I was doing, which renewed me...I would think about something that I was writing about, and then I would think: If this is the way, why are they doing such and such? Then I'd have a look at my painting and think: Why am I doing this?" In his criticism, as in his painting, he believed that the best criticism is the best description, which sticks close to the object of its attention and "tells you what is there." For him, in both painting and writing about painting, the opposition between abstraction and figuration was irrelevant. He often made the point that there is no essential difference between the two, and that each is "real" in its own way.

Among important paintings in the exhibition are Under the Elms, 1971-72, on loan from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; The Screen Porch, 1972, on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Door to the Woods, 1972, from a private collection; and The Harbor--Great Spruce Head, 1974, from the collection of Linda and Ross Rapaport. A number of portraits are of family members and close friends, such as painters Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher.

A catalogue of the exhibition, containing 30 color plates and 29 black and white reproductions, includes essays by Ashbery, Moffett, and John Myers, former director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, and excerpts from an interview with Porter conducted by Paul Cummings. The paperbound catalogue will be available (for \$19.95) at the Museum Bookstore.

Special lectures and films are scheduled with the exhibition in Cleveland. John Myers will speak on November 30 at 8:30 pm. John Moore and Sheila Webb of the Department of Art History and Education will give gallery talks in the exhibition during the opening week. The exhibition and all accompanying events, supported by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council, are free and open to the public.

For additional information, photographs, color slides, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.